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ABSTRACT

This paper describes certain fundamental realities and choices that planners and teachers of core curricula at the college level must take into account in order to devise programs of quality and integrity. Six common sense realities and the choices they demand are presented and discussed. First, core programs must avoid reducing the teaching and learning process to the level of content while ignoring the inquirers and the means of inquiry. Second, a comprehensive core design holds in mind the function of each of many components while linking them together into a unit. Third, a philosophy of the core program being created needs to be developed to guide decision making through a set of coherent and compelling principles. Fourth, planning and teaching a core curriculum should be accepted as a scholarly project of the highest, most demanding order, requiring thoughtful inquiry, systematic research, reflection on method, and clear expression. Fifth, it must be accepted by academic deans and others that building a core curriculum requires great effort and time on the part of administration and staff. Sixth, educational quality should not be sacrificed by restricting the core programs too greatly (for example, to less than six semester courses) or bloating the program to the point where it becomes unworkable, thus sacrificing educational quality. (GLR)

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CHOICES AND THE ISSUE OF QUALITY IN THE DESIGN OF TEXT-BASED CORE PROGRAMS

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CHOICES AND THE ISSUE OF QUALITY IN THE DESIGN OF TEXT-BASED CORE PROGRAMS

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Studying great books, one core tradition maintains, will ultimately bring us face-to-face with first principles. By the same token, it seems to me that serious study of the core curriculum itself ought to reveal the first principles of curriculum design. If not actually to set out first principles, I do intend briefly to describe certain fundamental realities and choices that core planners and teachers must take into account in order to devise programs of quality and integrity.*

For over ten years I have worked in special core programs and studied problems of general education at two liberal arts colleges, "Allegiance" and "St. Vitus." My experiences there count among the best and worst of times--intense and exciting, on the one hand, disappointing and enervating, on the other. That such idealism and good intentions on the part of the planners should have resulted in inadequate design, poor preparation, maladministration, and overwork may also ring a bell for you. It certainly has rung mine. Do not expect, therefore, an encomium from me about the integrated core. Instead I offer a purgative, but in the hope that with higher intellectual standards and

greater appreciation of the practical demands, we can create core programs whose quality is not compromised.[1]

At Allegiance College in the late '70's we launched an Integrated Studies Program of six team-taught courses, drawn together at the end by a concluding seminar. What we actually created, however, was not a core curriculum but a grant proposal for the NEH, a confection called "The Dynamics of Change," that invoked the interconnectedness of knowledge in the Humanities, the importance of the Western tradition (though only since the Reformation!), and the value of such programs for creating community among faculty. To this credo we appended a set of course descriptions, sample syllabi, and miniature bibliographies. The NEH awarded a planning grant followed by a substantial program grant. We imported consultants, held workshops, and set up evaluation schemes. Nonetheless, our courses virtually came into existence as we taught them and in the main consisted of bits and pieces of other classes that we normally taught, often scraped hastily together. Although we assigned essays, it would not be accurate to say that we taught writing: we had no time for revisions or individual conferences (Huber).

Nominally a great books program, the five-course cycle at St. Vitus came to life under similar circumstances: to provide an alternative to distribution requirements in the humanities and social sciences, with the writing and fine arts requirements tossed in for good measure. In their grant proposal, the founding fathers spoke in elevated tones of encouraging "an integrated

understanding of the component elements and historical development of Western civilization," of covering the "major cultural epochs of the West," of embracing "a common intellectual heritage," and of developing critical thinking and communications skills. Instruction, they determined, should follow the Socratic method. Apart from a month's work in the summer and a several-day workshop, the planners at St. Vitus envisioned no need for additional preparation, since the faculty, they believed, would learn right along with the students. There followed the customary course descriptions and reading lists. This program too received the NEH stamp of approval.

At both Allegiance and St. Vitus the grant writing effort governed the planning stages. Neither planning group imagined a core program as a total learning process, reducing it instead to book lists and descriptions of content. While they gave lip service to basic skills like writing, they offered few strategies for incorporating them. Because the planners short-circuited the design and preparation stages, the courses must still be fleshed out and prepared during the term they are taught, a task that places enormous demands on instructors teaching the courses for the first time. Program planners at both institutions spoke warmly of humanistic values and of the coherence of knowledge but shied away from fashioning a core philosophy that ensured genuine coherence and common purpose. They both turned a blind eye to historical precedents, and even resisted defining key terms like "interdisciplinary" and "integration." At Allegiance when one of us asked naively, "What do we mean by 'integrated,' the program

director, a professor of philosophy responded, "If we get bogged down in a debate over terms, we will never have a program." Few of the planners and instructors I worked with, including me, brought to the core project either a sufficiently broad liberal studies background or the systematic, critical, and precise kind of reflection that we would require of ourselves in other scholarly work. Most, in fact, did not see the project as scholarly. After laboring in both vineyards, I cannot truthfully say that either core program offered greater benefits than well-taught courses in the distribution system. Neither delivered what it promised to students, particularly in basic skills and the fine arts.

I would level similar criticism against the NEH's own "50-Hours" Model: it provides no philosophical foundation, reduces the matter of design to a general statement of objectives and course content, resists coming to grips with the learning process as a whole, and so on (Cheney). Yet as we try to profit from our experience with these flawed models and give the lessons learned a more positive formulation, I am struck less by the absence of philosophical rigor and thorough, comprehensive planning than by glaring lapses of common sense. Perhaps our eagerness for dramatically improved general education and the vision we share for the core approach mask the obvious realities that compromise quality when we try to put the vision into practice. Shifting now to exhortation, I want to mention briefly six such common-sense realities and the choices they demand of us as planners and teachers.

1. We know from experience that teaching and learning form a complex dynamic process. In designing core programs we must avoid reducing that process solely to the level of content--the objects of inquiry--while ignoring the inquirers and the means of inquiry. We must somehow do justice to the process in its entirety, its wholeness, even in the planning stages of a core program. At the heart of this process, I believe, is a profound transformation of the learners through disciplina, that is, through acquiring productive habits of thought and living, searching out and sharing meaning, building historical contexts, growing in moral awareness and aesthetic discernment, and finding vocation. We are thus responsible, not just to spread before students the verbal and artistic achievements of Western culture, but to strive for certain outcomes--actually training them to sort, order, analyze, solve, communicate. We look toward our students developing craftsmanship and precision, irony and wit, skills to evaluate, discriminate, and persuade, and toward their grasping the paradox of high seriousness wedded to abstract playfulness in the game of ideas.

2. A program equal to the complexity of the whole teaching-learning phenomenon might resemble Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk--a musical score, a poetic text, mime, painting, architecture, dance, all drawn together in aesthetic unity and rendered present by skilled performers. In an equivalent fully integrated core design the performers are the students and teachers. The basic intellectual skills and the disciplinary tools form the instruments and musical expertise; the overall core design, the score,

prepared by the planners guides the performers and orchestrates the texts, music, and arts, linking them with leitmotifs. A comprehensive core design holds in mind the function of each component, even as it connects components together. When most core planners refer to integration, however, they mean primarily the intermingling of different types of readings--religious, political, philosophical, literary--spiced up with a hint of the fine arts. Their "scores" are thus composed solely with course content in mind. The principle of integration in its Gesamtkunstwerk fullness, however, clearly points to far more extensive patterns of coherence and requires a much larger number of choices that directly affect core program quality. To demonstrate, I offer a sample of the choices that we as planners and instructors confront.

--How will we integrate training in reading, writing, critical thinking, and discussion into courses already filled with demanding readings? Should we perhaps begin the design process with strategies for training in basic skills rather than with course content? Will our design make provision for instructors to learn how to teach such skills effectively?

--How will we integrate the disciplinary means of inquiry (the arts, techniques, ways of viewing, habits, values, and analytical tools)? Should our entire design reflect primarily the goal of training students equally in the four humanities disciplines (those of language and symbol systems, those of the analysis and appreciation of ideas,

those of literary and artistic criticism, and the historiographic arts)? If so, how do we treat the techniques and tools of the social sciences? On the other hand, are first-year students even ready for an introduction to the liberal disciplines, or should we restrict ourselves occasionally to modeling certain techniques and interdisciplinary approaches?

--At the level of unifying leitmotifs, should we build into the design a web of recurring themes and optics that emphasize important analytical perspectives--a gender optic, for example, or the historical concept of movements of "long duration"? Will a structure of explicit themes and optics spoil the virgin encounter of bright young minds with great ideas? Should they be free to discover their own connections?

--Should a curriculum that features great texts even try to integrate the fine arts? Or does that simply overload the system?

--The great books/great ideas/great topics models often treat chronological relations with deliberate neglect. Do freshmen need a chronological narrative to supply the missing historical contexts and patterns of historical development? And should we therefore begin with the "epochs of Western culture" and simply enhance them with original source readings and the arts?

--As a whole, core curricula are notoriously scripto-centric. How do we integrate the missing voices of those not

empowered to write, women and aboriginal peoples, for example, or incorporate the vast cultural domain of oral tradition?

--Can we branch out beyond Western civilization without losing focus? Is it really true that students need to know their own tradition before encountering another?

--What depth of integration should we aim for on the level of "performance"? Do we breach the classroom walls with informal group meals and social occasions, or field trips to plays and museums, to create a "total learning environment"? Should we attempt to manage the way students study by providing study guides? Should lectures be ruled out entirely or set in balance with discussion?

--How do we include in the Gesamtkunstwerk the students' interests and talents? Perhaps through creative projects or journals?

3. A myriad difficult questions of this sort clearly show why core programs need a philosophy, for only with reference to a set of coherent and compelling principles can the right choices be made. The task of crafting an appropriate philosophical basis ought not fall prey to grant deadlines. We should give ourselves time to reflect on learning theory, cognitive development, the history and theory of the humanities and liberal studies, and especially the history of previous core experiments. At a minimum we should consider carefully the lessons learned at Chicago, Columbia, Wisconsin, and St. John's. Before starting to design a

core, a seminar could form for a years' discussion of a few of the great texts on education. They might include Rousseau's Emile, Werner Jaeger's Paideia, H.-I. Marrou's Education in Antiquity, John Dewey's Democracy and Education, A.N. Whitehead's The Aims of Education, Robert Hutchins's The Great Conversation, R.S. Crane's The Idea of the Humanities, Daniel Bell's, The Reforming of General Education, W.G.Perry Jr.'s Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years, and Peter Elbow's Embracing Contraries.

4. To me it seems self-evident that we must redefine the notion of scholarly work to banish the false dichotomy between personal scholarship and teaching duties. Planning and teaching a core program needs to be accepted as a scholarly project of the highest, most demanding order, requiring thoughtful inquiry, systematic research, reflection on method, and clear expression (Boyer). Looking at the core curriculum in this light would go a long way toward eliminating the half-baked efforts that I have described. But rare is the colleague who gravitates naturally toward core teaching and fewer still are those with a broad liberal arts background and interdisciplinary training to go with it. Beyond the planners' seminar already outlined, therefore, we ought to make provision for extensive in-house training for instructors. A week-long workshop will not suffice; I have in mind something more like a general education institute covering five key areas: 1) reading and research on the history of core curricula and on educational philosophy and psychology; 2) introductory study of those disciplines in which instructors have no

formal training; 3) training to teach critical thinking, reading, writing, and discussion; 4) extensive observation of the program in action; 5) preparation of the individual courses.

5. Those who plan and teach core curricula conscientiously pay a stiff price in overwork, and the more comprehensive the integration the higher the price. Most integrated core offerings require initially at least three times more effort to prepare and teach than a "regular" course. Academic deans, however, are loath to acknowledge the extra effort with adequate compensation and released time. Overwork, the most pressing reality for me at Allegiance and St. Vitus, more than any other factor reduced the quality of these core programs. Those of us addicted to integrated teaching may not feel brash enough to complain publicly about our workload, but if quality is a priority, then planners must figure into the program design regular summer preparation grants and significant amounts of released time. That obviously calls for outside funding. NEH grants can only get the ball rolling, and long-term needs can probably only be met by a dedicated endowment.

6. So obvious are the realities of scale that I hesitate even to mention them. Yet they weigh heavily in the issue of quality. Programs of fewer than six semester courses (eighteen semester hours) should not be offered, because it will be impossible in a discussion-based format properly to integrate the fine arts and basic skills. In any core program, if writing is to be emphasized, the student-teacher ratio should not exceed 14:1,. Fourteen students composing and revising eight short assignments per

semester can easily generate a total of 224 drafts that need to be read and discussed individually. On the question of program size, the "50-Hours Report" seems to reflect a trend toward a monolithic core, a set of several courses through which each and every student is compelled to pass. I cannot see how general education of this stripe can promise quality, if indeed it works at all. In a small college of 1500 students, for example, the "50-Hours Model" would call for scheduling at least 120 sections per year alone for the six-course "Cultures and Civilizations" portion of the plan (Cheney). Tilted as the model is toward social and cultural history, how could a small college possibly staff such a behemoth without conscripting a 100 or so colleagues from other fields? The kind of coercion inherent in the monolithic approach apparently startled the faculty at St. Vitus last spring [1989] sufficiently for it to vote decisively not to consider the NEH model in its curriculum review.

I have tried to enumerate some of the problems that dull the luster of special core programs--inadequate design, incomplete integration, insufficient preparation, overwork, failure to draw on past precedents. I hope also to have brought into focus important realities and choices and to have set forth standards for improvement. Excellence in general education does not come easy or cheap. Will the price be too high for most American colleges?

Note

*This is a revised version of a paper delivered at the Third Annual Conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Core Curriculum, Denver, Colorado, October 7, 1990.

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